FOOTHILLS TIMBER SALE PROJECT
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

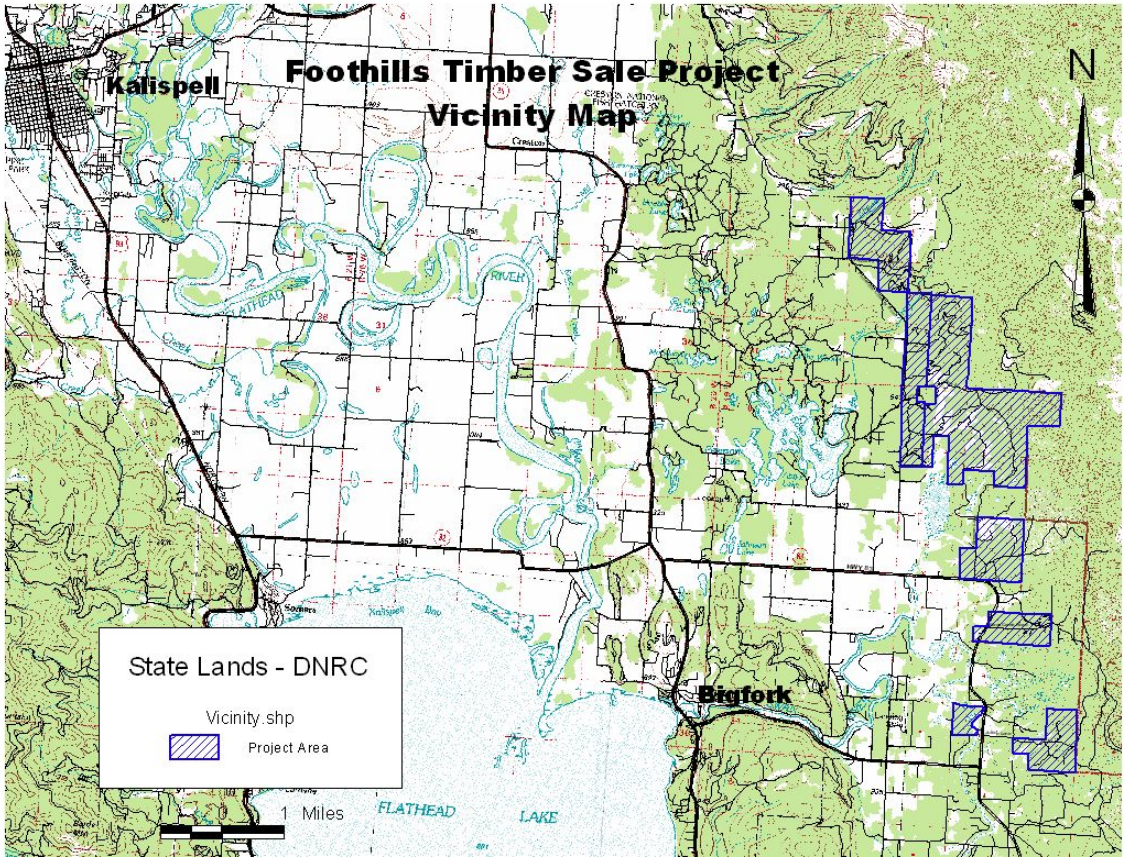
The purpose of this document is to summarize the Foothills Timber Sale Project Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS). This summary describes the proposed action, impacts, alternatives, and proposed decision. It also describes areas of controversy, major conclusions, and the tradeoffs among alternatives.

The Kalispell Unit of the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) proposes to implement forest management activities on forested State Trust Lands. The objectives of this project are to provide revenue for the school trust, manage for long-term timber productivity, and develop a manageable road system in the project area.

If a harvest alternative were selected, an estimated 7 to 10 million board feet of timber would be sold and harvested. This volume would be harvested from approximately 1156 to 1468 acres. Existing stream crossings would be improved as needed for the selected alternative. With the selection of a harvest alternative, up to one mile of new permanent road and two miles of temporary road would be constructed. Under either harvest alternative, road maintenance, reconstruction, abandonment, and closure would occur within parts of the project area. Approximately 850 acres or less would initiate new forest stands using natural seeding or hand planting of conifer seedlings.

The project area is located approximately five miles northeast of Bigfork, Montana (Figure 1). It is located within Sections 21, 27, 28, and 34 of Township 28 North, Range 19 West and Sections 1, 2, 3, 10, 11, 14, 23, 24,35 and 36 of Township 27 North, Range 19 West. State Trust Lands within the project share property boundaries of approximately 5.5 miles with United States Forest Service (USFS) and 20 miles with private landowners.

Figure 1. Foothills Vicinity Map



Public Involvement and Project Development

Public scoping occurs in the initial stage of an EIS and is used to inform the public that a State agency is proposing an action and invite comments or concerns about the possible impacts of the project. Public scoping for the Foothills Timber Sale Project was initiated in May 2001 with a letter to known interested parties. In June 2001, DNRC solicited additional public participation in the Foothills Timber Sale Project proposal by placing notices in the Kalispell's Daily Interlake and Bigfork Eagle newspapers. The public-comment period for the initial project proposal was open for 30 days. A field trip for interested parties was conducted in September 2001.

The Interdisciplinary Team (ID Team), made up of DNRC's wildlife biologist, hydrologist, and several foresters, began compiling the issues and gathering information related to current conditions in the spring of 2001. During 2002 some work was conducted on developing alternatives and initial work on environmental effects analysis and fieldwork.

Fire activity requiring project personnel to focus on protection activities throughout the state during 2002 and 2003 delayed the project. Planning for this project was resumed in May of 2004. In April 2005, a newsletter presenting the action alternatives was distributed to update interested parties and solicit further input prior to the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS).

As a result of the April 2005 letters and notices in the newspapers approximately 81 letters and phone calls were received. The issues and concerns identified through public scoping were summarized and used to further refine the project. Interested parties wanted to know how the project would affect the following resources: vegetation, water quality, wildlife, soils, economics, recreation, air quality, safety, and aesthetics.

The DEIS was published and available for public comment from December 15, 2005 through January 20, 2006 (45 days). Twenty-eight comments were received. In accordance with the Administrative Rules of Montana (ARM) 36.2.530, DNRC decided to adopt the DEIS as the Final Environmental Impact Statement, with all corrections, responses to comments, and additional information found in the Foothills Timber Sale Project errata. All issues raised by the public were either addressed in the DEIS, the responses to comments, or in the FEIS errata; thus, DNRC felt that it was unnecessary to reproduce a full FEIS. That document in combination with the DEIS constitutes the Foothills Timber Sale Project Final Environmental Impact Statement.

Alternative Development

An Interdisciplinary (ID) Team was formed in the spring of 2001 to work on the Foothills Timber Sale Project. The role of an ID Team is to summarize issues and concerns, develop management options within the project area, and analyze the potential impacts of a proposal on the human and natural environments. The ID team developed three possible choices (alternatives):

No Action Alternative A

No Action Alternative A is used as a baseline for comparing the effects that the action alternatives would have on the environment. It is also considered a reasonable alternative for selection.

Timber harvesting as proposed would not occur. Firewood cutting and gathering would continue on an annual basis. Intermittently, small quantities of wood products would continue to be sold and removed from small areas. Salvage logging and removal of hazard trees within easements or residential leases would continue.

Temporary roads would not be built and restricted roads would not be reconstructed at this time. Maintenance mostly in the form of re-establishing road closures or installation of additional road closures would continue, as funding and priorities allow. The Birch Creek stream crossing would not be rehabilitated at this time.

Recreational uses of the area, both general and special would continue to include hiking, biking, ATV riding, shooting, hunting, horseback riding, Nordic skiing, and snowmobiling. Efforts to

curtail vandalism or resource damage associated with unauthorized recreational use would continue as funding and priorities allow.

Fuels mitigation and weed control efforts would continue as funding and priorities allow.

Forest and plant succession would continue to be mainly influenced by the occurrence of natural events, such as insects and disease outbreaks, windthrow, or wildfire. Understory plant succession and to a lesser degree forest succession on leased sites used for grazing and home sites would continue to be mainly influenced by those uses in a forested setting.

Processing of the application for a timber conservation license on 1.2 acres in the E ½ SW ¼ Section 24, T27N, R19W would terminate with the selection of No Action Alternative A.

Action Alternative B

Action Alternative B would apply silvicultural treatments to 1,468 acres, harvesting approximately 9 MMBF of timber. Regeneration harvests would be used to treat 843 acres, and intermediate harvests would be used to treat 625 acres. This alternative treats the greatest amount of acres and would require more extensive road use and construction. To access harvest units and improve road closure effectiveness 44.5 miles of road would be used. Approximately 35.1 miles would require maintenance or reconstruction. New construction of permanent road would be limited to 1.1 mile; approximately 1.8 miles of new temporary road construction would be required; 15.8 miles would be reconstructed prior to use, and 18.2 miles would be closed after use. Road closures or abandonment would reduce open road status in the project area by approximately 10.5 miles.

Action Alternative C

Action Alternative C would apply silvicultural treatments to 1,156 acres, harvesting approximately 7 MMBF of timber. Regeneration harvests would be used to treat 531 acres, and intermediate harvests would be used to treat 625 acres. This alternative would treat fewer acres, requiring less extensive road use and construction. To access harvest units and improve road closure effectiveness 38.7 miles of road would be used. Approximately 29.3 miles requires maintenance or reconstruction. New construction of permanent road would not be required under this alternative; approximately 1 mile of new temporary road construction would be required; 13.7 miles would be reconstructed prior to use, and 17.0 miles would be closed after use. Road closures or abandonment would reduce open road status in the project area by approximately 10.5 miles.

Summary of Effects

The effects of each alternative were studied for each resource (e.g. vegetation, wildlife, soils). The following summary gives a brief description of the effects for each alternative.

Vegetation

Both action alternatives are designed to improve timber stand productivity within the Foothills analysis area, as a necessary means for providing revenue generating opportunities in the future, while limiting present logging and road development costs. Timber harvesting focuses on mostly decadent stands dominated with grand fir that historically contained a larger component of western white pine, western larch, ponderosa pine, and/or Douglas-fir. Both alternatives maintain or promote the establishment of desired forest species. Silvicultural treatments designed for meeting the above objectives generally include regeneration harvest for older stands and intermediate harvest for younger stands. Action Alternative B would treat 312 acres more than Action Alternative C.

Hydrology

Portions of the road systems do not currently meet Montana Best Management Practices (BMPs) for surface drainage or erosion control. There are also several stream crossings that do not currently meet applicable BMPs. These sites are mainly a result of road construction that occurred before the adoption of Forest Management BMPs in Montana. Both Action Alternatives

would reduce the overall sediment contribution to project area streams. Reductions in sediment delivery would happen due to installation of BMPs on several existing stream crossings, and replacement of stream crossing structures that are not adequately designed**.** Harvest activities proposed within these watersheds would generate annual water yield increases ranging from as little as 0.1% in Wolf Creek, to as much as 3.8% in Rocky Creek. These levels of increase would not be large enough to cause channel instability, and leave each watershed well within its allowable water yield increase.

Fisheries
Implementation of either action alternative is not expected to have any impacts to fisheries presence and genetics. Road improvements associated with Alternative B and C would reduce long-term sedimentation from low to moderate grade roads in the project area. With respect to those existing conditions described in Chapter 3, the selection of Alternative B or C would have a low risk of direct and indirect impacts to the sediment and channel form components of fisheries habitat.

Wildlife
Timber harvest would result in changes in forested and interior habitat that would reduce habitat for forest dwelling and interior wildlife species, while increasing habitat for wildlife species that use openings and edge habitats. Snag dependent species associated with snag habitat and open canopy forested conditions are expected to increase, but to a lesser extent than if a full complement of historic snag densities were retained.

Forage availability for grizzly bears could increase due to timber harvest alternatives, but benefits to grizzly bears, especially in the spring, are expected to be minor. Harvesting of forested vegetation adjacent to private property without retention of visual screening is expected to increase the risk of mortality to grizzly bears using those areas. Successful road abandonment and closures would reduce disturbance and access in the area and would benefit grizzly bears by reducing energy expenditure, increasing forage time (without disturbance), and decrease the risk of mortality.

Fisher resting and denning structure is expected to decline, resulting in decreased fisher habitat in all units. Action Alternative B would reduce pileated nesting habitat by 833 acres, leaving approximately 1,585 acres. Action Alternative C would reduce pileated nesting habitat by 709 acres, leaving approximately 1,709 acres. Since the project area is more transitional range than core winter range, the reduction in thermal and snow intercept cover is expected to result in minor changes in big game use, but not to effect carry capacity.

Air Quality
Alternative B and Alternative C would temporarily increase the amount of smoke and dust produced in the project area, Alternative B's increase would be slightly higher in the north half of the project area. The increased dust and smoke emissions are not expected to exceed air quality standards, and would be temporary, localized reductions to air quality.

Aesthetics
Alternative B would harvest approximately 1468 acres and change the current view on these acres. Regeneration harvests would occur on 843 acres. Views would be very open with the majority of the overstory being removed. 625 acres would have intermediate harvest and have a more mosaic overstory. Action Alternative C would harvest approximately 1156 acres and change the current view on these acres. Regeneration harvests would occur on 531 acres. Views would be very open with the majority of the overstory being removed. 625 acres would have intermediate harvest and have a more mosaic overstory.

Economics
The School Trust income from a sale under Alternative B is estimated to be $1,235,730. That would be enough to fund the education of 175 students for 1 year based on an average cost of

$7,080 as determined by information provided by the Montana Office of Public Instruction. The School Trust income from a sale under Alternative C is estimated to be $922,520, enough to fund the education of 130 students for 1 year based on an average cost of $7,080 per Student per year.

Proposed Decision

Selection of Alternative B along with mitigations common to both alternatives has been identified as the proposed decision. Substantial consideration has been given to project objectives, the difference in effects between alternatives, and comments received on the Draft EIS. The advantages of Alternative B over Alternative C are based primarily on Alternative B best meeting the project objectives. Differences in impacts to resources between harvest alternatives are relatively small.

Information and Overview of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement

This Executive Summary of the FEIS was prepared in accordance with the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA). The information in it is a brief summary of the FEIS. The FEIS contains more complete and detailed information on the purpose, development, analyses, and conclusions of the proposed project. The FEIS contains specific information for each resource (e.g. wildlife, fisheries, economics) and the anticipated effects of this proposed action.

To receive a copy of the Foothills Timber Sale Final Environmental Impact Statement, please contact Pete Seigmund at (406) 751-2266 or send written requests to Pete Seigmund, DNRC, Kalispell Unit, 2250 Highway 93 N, Kalispell, Montana 59901. The Foothills FEIS and DEIS can also be viewed on the web at http://dnrc.mt.gov/env_docs/.

The Foothills FEIS will be sent to people that have requested it during the development of this project. At least 15 days following publication of the FEIS, Greg Poncin, Kalispell Unit Manager, will choose an alternative or a combination of alternatives. This decision will be recommended to the State Land Board that will make the final decision.